

INTERVIEWEE: Ramon Rivera, Executive Director  
of La Casa de Don Pedro  
INTERVIEWER: Vivian Lanzot  
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Vivian: For the record, could you state your full name?

Ramon: My name is Ramon Rivera and what else do you want to know?

Vivian: Uh, how old are you?

Ramon: I'm 42.

Vivian: When you were in Puerto Rico, what motivated you to come to U.S.?

Ramon: Well, uh, I don't think it was a question of motivation... uhm, I uh, I was raised in a household that, where my father was a military person. He was a career soldier. Uh, in military terms, they called them "lifers", and mostly I spent either living in army bases in Puerto Rico, uh, or when I lived in the civilian population my father was away in Korea or somewhere else or what they call "outstation" in some foreign base. Basically, I travelled most of my life. Every couple of years I would have to move to find a new location, or new country, a new state depending what it was. ~~So~~, there was very little choice...I had very little choice, or motivation, in terms of doing anything as a child, you, you just go where your parents go. Uhm, and when my father retired from the military, he decided to relocate to the South Bronx and he did that basically because, uh, I had a maternal aunt who had raised my mother and had lived in the Bronx for many, many years and did not want to return to Puerto Rico with us, ~~and~~ ~~she~~ She was getting very old and my mother wanted to take care of her. So, we ended up living in the South Bronx, New York city, ~~And~~ at that time I was in the fifth grade, about twelve years old, about eleven or twelve years old. I...

Vivian: So, basically you've grown up here? In...

Ramon: Yes, or in Germany, or Panama...

Vivian: Oh, so when you came to the South Bronx, you still moved around? Or had your father retired?

Ramon: No, no, that was the last time we travelled. From the time I was born till about the time I was twelve, I travelled around the world and, and the U.S., to live on military bases.

Vivian: Exciting. How many brothers and sisters do you have?

Ramon: I have a brother who is the middle child, and a sister who is the youngest. We're all two years apart. So, my brother is 40, and my sister is 38.

Vivian: You're the oldest?

Ramon: I'm the oldest.

Vivian: What's your father's name?

Ramon: Same. I'm a junior--Ramon Rivera.

Vivian: And your mom?

Ramon: Carmen Rivera-Colon.

Vivian: Are they both living today?

Ramon: Yes, they're both living and they're living in Cidra, Puerto Rico. *check which?* We're originally from Caguas. That's where my family has spent most of its time. That's where our relatives live. Uh, my father originally was born, in, Ciales, Orocovis, a mountain area of Puerto Rico, and my mother was from Caguas, and most of the properties they've owned have been in Caguas, and now recently they moved to Florida, uh, around the Disney World area. They didn't like it, they didn't like that part of Florida. They decided to move back to Puerto Rico. They bought some land in Cidra, so they are there now. They're pretty healthy and still kicking.

Vivian: Do you plan to go back?

Ramon: To Puerto Rico? Uh, not ever to stay, unless something drastically can alter my thinking. I'm really a very urban person. I've enjoyed very much living in New York--the New York metropolitan area--most of my life, and, with the exception of spending time in Puerto Rico and other countries that I've visited from time to time, I would enjoy just being here. I love this country and I love....

Vivian: So you presently live in New York?

Ramon: No, I live here in Newark. I live in the Ironbound section of Newark, which is called "down-neck". It's primarily a Portuguese community, but at one time it was, well, you had Irish, Polish, Turkish, Italians...

Vivian: What was your experience when you first came from Puerto Rico to New York?

Ramon: To the South Bronx.<sup>?</sup> Well, when I first came, New York was in transition. Puerto Ricans had just been starting to migrate to the Bronx, uhm, if you lived in "El Barrio" or in the lower east side of Manhattan, people who were able to get a better job, with more money would actually move their families into the South Bronx. For me, as a youngster who had been in a military kind of setting, where you lived in a compound and you got all these kinds of restrictions and everybody knew who you were and so forth, uhm, it was very exciting living in the South Bronx. So, I had a lot of friends and it was very adventurous ~~and~~ I did a lot of crazy things which were very exciting ~~and~~ I had never done before.

Vivian: Like what?

Ramon: Well, we would play all kinds of games in the streets. We lived in a block, or street, that had connected buildings on each side. All, approximately five stories high. And every part of the seasons, whether it was summer, winter, spring, or fall, we had a different kind of activity to carry out as a group. We had this small group of us. Maybe like twenty of us that were about the same age. We hung out together and we played games like, Johnny on the Pony, and Ring Olivio kicked the King, and uhm, during Halloween, we used to go shopping for rotten fruits, and these markets...there was a whole market under the train stops and then we would throw them at the people. Then we'd get all dressed up on Saturday and stuff. We would go swimming in the Bronx Zoo... ~~They~~ They had a little river and we would swim there, swim in what they called a creek, which is a little river, uh, right near where we lived, ~~and~~ ~~It's~~ It's probably polluted and horrible--maybe that's why we have skin problems.

Vivian: [laughing] So you were an adventurous person?

Ramon: [smiling] We were. We used to sneak out of the house in the middle of the night and go to Time Square and ride the subway and sneak back in the house, and mother <sup>↑</sup> knew you were out. *Never?*

Vivian: Were these little gangs and things like that?

Ramon: Well, were all kids. We weren't gangs in the negative sense We were just a little young for that.

Vivian: How about school?

Ramon: School, uhm...I always did very well in school. Then, I had a good foundation. Uhm, being brought up in that of military spirit~~s~~, regular schools and regular teachers. So that was, uh, good, uh, in the South Bronx the school system was very in tact then, most of the teachers were white, uhm,



all of ethnic, Jewish mostly, uhm, and they were really good teachers. I could still remember some of my teachers, and they really cared. They taught well. Uhm, you know, they always had some individuals that were a little tough and you felt they didn't like you and so forth. But, most of the kids, first of all, they were a mixed class. There were a few Blacks, Hispanics, whites, so there wasn't...there were Asians, you even had Chinese and other groups. So it wasn't a segregated school system as we find now. And the quality of the school was fairly good. People respected the teachers' authority and behaved. But of course, we had some kids who were already heading for problems in terms of the school work and just their behavioral problems.

Vivian: Well, being that your parents, well, your father was a military person, and you travelled so much, how were you able to establish yourself, you know, with the school and everything?

Ramon: Well, you know, it was very frightening. The first year I was in school, uhm, I had heard all these stories, like, how tough it was and it was frightening and I didn't experience any problems till one day a teacher left the room and left me the class monitor, you know. We were supposed to write down on the board anyone who messes up. And being very, uh, what I am saying, well, there was this kid who was screwing up and I wrote his name. I still remember his ~~name~~ <sup>he</sup> ~~name~~, Rafael, and he was a youngster that, you know, ~~I~~ was the first--there were a couple of kids that were ~~then~~ on welfare, you know. ~~Again~~, they didn't call it welfare. I forgot what they called it, assistance, or something, and, you could tell he was very poor. His attitude in terms of the other kids ~~and~~ the teacher, was very tough and he threatened me, to take his name off or he was going to punch me out after school and all that. And I kept the name there. ~~So~~, when the teacher came back in, she called him up to the front and I was standing up in the front and she's asking me in front of him what, you know, what he had done and I explained what he had done and he ~~pursued~~ <sup>he</sup> to punch me in the face and I started crying, ~~and~~ <sup>then</sup> he threatened me that he was going to get me outside and I just sat down till the class went out. [smiling]. And I was really frightened. Uhm, I'm talking about really being scared. And you know, the longer it took to get out of the class, the more the time I had to think that somebody was going to physically beat me up, someone who had this reputation of being the toughest guy around and uh, when we came outside, he sure enough came after me. And I was scared, my cheeks must've weighed about a thousand pounds, and I already had cried in front of the whole class. So, [laughing] you know, there was nothing, and I just finally started fighting, and I just kept on fighting back until I finally tired him out. I

must've ran, I did like Muhammed Ali or Sugar Ray Robinson, ran away from the cap so he'd get tired. Then I punched him. After he'd beat me up for awhile, allowed me to lose the fear. Then, after that, my own reputation in terms of the value, could not, you know, hit and not expect to defend himself, was clear, very clear. No one could mess with me. I made friends or so, but I had a couple of occasions like that. We had some kids who were really terrible on some of the things they did. They took kids and if they found out that they were really weak--particularly the white Jewish kids--really got harassed. I always felt very sympathetic toward that. These guys were bullies.

Vivian: Did you experience any racism, being that you travelled so much?

Ramon: Uh, not that I recognized overtly. I began to experience that as an older, you know, adolescent, not when I was you know, pre-teen, like twelve or thirteen. Plus, I got older, you begin to feel some things.

Vivian: Getting back to that incident with the fight and all that; how has that, you know, that guy threatening you and telling you he was going to beat you up, how has that prepared... how did that prepare you for the future in terms of, you know, as a man?

Ramon: Well, well, one thing, it certainly taught me, and my father told me all my life, that you gotta stand up to people who are bullies--or injustices. You have to do that and that, you know, you're going to be scared and frightened by it, and so forth, but you have to overcome it. So, basically, it has helped me overcome fear and to stand up for what I believe in even if it means getting beat up. [smiles]

Vivian: Does that include, you know, verbal? You see, a lot of people don't necessarily physically abuse you, they verbally abuse you.

Ramon: Well, I've learned that, I still use it. People, uh, sometimes tend to do a very mammalian reaction. Like lions, they scream at you or curse at you. Call you all kinds of "m.f." and so forth. They expect you to back down from them, and, I feel, sometimes that if, if they concern, the issue is worth it, I'll stand up, if not, I might just walk away; depends on the circumstance or whatever. But, yeah, verbal, any kind of harassment, when it's even to someone else, I might get involved. It all depends what the issues are or concerns are.

Vivian: So how long have you been living in Newark?

Ramon: Since 1960--well, I was here in '67, then I went back to New York for a couple of years and I came back in '69. Ever since '69 I've been living here.

Vivian: What led you to come to Newark? Do you have any family members here?

Ramon: No, uhm, I had been working with programs that dealt with a therapeutic community, that, what they do is create drug free centers for people who have been addicted. And I had been working with groups in New York. And I was learning all of the techniques of group work. Then I met a man in New York that was from Newark, named George Hicks. George operated a program in Newark called the New Well, and he contracted four of us. I think, let me see...yeah, four of us to work in Newark. In carrying out these sessions with people who were members his programs, basically I came out to that work, and I rented an apartment with the other people and eventually most of them went back to New York and I stayed. At the same time I was beginning to become involved in a lot of political activist kinds of involvements with the Young Lords, and some other organizations that were trying to develop a sense of pride and consciousness about being Puerto Rican and trying to organize young people in the community to stand up for some of the rights that we have under the system. I had been working with a group of people here in Newark and I went to Chicago and met the people who had started the Young Lords and worked with them for a couple of months. Then I also found out that in different parts of the country, New York City, Boston...different parts of Connecticut, even South Jersey, there were movements of the Young Lords beginning to flourish. So I began to work out of New Jersey and New York, which had the largest contingent of Young Lords. The groups in Bronx, lower East Side, Manhattan began to be the center of the organizing and I just became involved with them and took responsibility for the state of New Jersey. We always has some internal disputes cause the people from New York decided that they were going to be the Young Lords party, and my response to it was that New Jersey didn't need New York to really dictate what we were about and what we were going to do. There was always these little problems in dealing between us and New York. And the Chicago group had another, they were the founding members you know, and so there was a little squabble all the time between the different sectors. I just went on and did what I had to do in New Jersey.

Vivian: So it was about leadership?

Ramon: It was about leadership, about styles of work. New York wanted actually to have us turn money to them that we had, that we utilized, that we raised locally. I was willing to donate some money to them but not the money that they wanted...so, little problems...Also they wanted to dictate what we were going to be. They were going to call me the captain of the Young Lords in New Jersey, of Newark, and I decided, you know, I was going to be a state chairperson, and I was [laughing] going to organize the state. So, it was those kinds of squabbles. Uhm, basically I went out and did organizing. We started by recruiting young people both from the community and from the universities. We loved the very active group of folks of different ages. In fact, we worked out of this building for a very long time and we went out and began to feed the children in the mornings, the breakfast period. We would go out and do blood testing for lead poisoning...all kinds of things.

Vivian: Were you being paid for this, or was it volunteer?

Ramon: No, we did this, we would raise our own money and we did it on our own. We would get the food for the breakfast program from the merchants of the community; we would get clothing from donations. People would just donate and bring it there and so forth. We had a newspaper, so the newspaper would tell people what we needed. We had demonstrations about different injustices that were occurring. We began to become involved with trying to raise community support to have the United Community Corporation, which was then the community action program which was set up by Johnson to fight poverty, and the Hispanic community was not really faring well. Most of the funds were controlled by the black community and they were not sharing with us. And, along with a whole group of us, maybe about 12 of use, on an early morning in 1972 or something like that, we took over their headquarters, the United Community Corporation headquarters, on payday and the police and everybody, they didn't know that we only had about 8 of us inside the building. They must've thought we had an army, that we were trouble. Most of them were women. It was only about 3 or 4 men and the rest of them were women. And this hit national news, the whole community went out and started picketing in support of what we were doing. We then negotiated and began to force the United Community Corp. to expand its Board of Directors, to include Hispanics, to give funds--anti-poverty monies--to the community organizations like F.O.C.U.S. They gave a group of young people, we were working with some monies for youth recreation and leadership programs and the same time we began to establish relationships with some black groups that were not satisfied with what black leadership was doing and we developed some coalitions out of that.



Vivian: And how did that work out, working with blacks? Because there was a lot of conflict at one time between the blacks and the Puerto Ricans.

Ramon: There's always been conflict and there'll probably always be. You really have to understand where each group comes from. You know, Puerto Ricans, we have our own biases, our own prejudices, we have our own fears, so we tend to react from that and the black community also has its own prejudices, its own sense of who should be next or who should be the leader or the power; who should get what piece or what share; whose should be bigger. And we feel the same way, so there's always conflict. Yet, within our community, both in the black and the Hispanic community, there were people who had enough vision and enough understanding of the system to say, well while we fight each other, the real problem is not addressed and we began then to develop some long strategies, which meant working together, coalitions to bring about some positive changes. You see, you gotta remember that in 1970, or in the late 60's--'69 '68, you had an administration in the city of Newark which was headed by a former Congressman who had been a Mayor for years and had been taped talking to mafia figures. How he had decided to become mayor and leave his congressional seat to become a multi-millionaire and he was going to do that by sacking the city; by taking the resources of the city and doing whatever he had to do to make these millions in a corrupt way. There was no elected--or there had been one or two elected black officials, I think they had a guy named George Richardson who had been elected, a black guy, and there was a minister who was also a councilman. But the black community made up an overwhelming majority of the city of Newark, as the Hispanic population was growing. So, that was a very serious concern to a lot of people and what we tried to do was, we began to organize around that. Uh, the black community wanted a change and we wanted a change. And what we did was, we developed a political strategy to organize our respective communities through a mechanism called the Black and Puerto Rican Convention. That was Hispanics and Blacks coming together and developing a political agenda and these issues and agendas were topped by the need to elect Blacks and Hispanics to office and we were very successful in electing Blacks, but we were unsuccessful in electing Hispanics. Well, we ran a Hispanic, but that person did not win. Once, Ken Gibson became the Mayor in 1970, this was history nationwide that a Black person had been elected Mayor of a large urban city like Newark, the largest city in the state. That followed the, you know, it had only been in '67 that the riots had occurred, to 1970--it was only 3 years and those years leading up to 1980 or 82, or something, people in the city of Newark were leaving. I'm not talking just about whites, whites left in hoards. The



only whites that remained were those people who could not afford to leave because they could not find inexpensive housing somewhere else or people who were very old, senior citizens who didn't want to pack up their roots and move somewhere else, strange, strange environment. So you have to see that also a large group of black and Hispanic middle class also left. So sometimes you would just think about whites leaving, that left Newark with a population overwhelmingly very poor, very unskilled in many ways, with very limited education and that's been a major problem we've been wrestling with over the last 20 years.

Vivian: So, what would you say is the reason why there were not too many Hispanics elected?

Ramon: We only ran one Hispanic and he was Ramon Anese, and he ran at large and I think the reason why a hispanic was not elected was basically, because the blacks did not vote for him. Though he got a lot of votes, there's never been another hispanic who has been able to get as many votes as he did, but yet they were not enough to allow him to win. And basically, it was clear that blacks voted for blacks, you know, and did not do what their leadership wanted them to do, which was to vote for a ticket. But, uh, Ramon Anese became a part of a slate, and this slate represented blacks and hispanics. But when people voted on election day, they went into the little curtain, inside the machine, pulled the curtain and voted ethnically, and that happens a lot. I mean, we've seen that over and over, both with black, whites and Hispanics. You tend to go in there and look for a Hispanic name and push that down and maybe, with a little panic, don't look for anybody else. Others will pick and choose and they will go up or down on the ballot very selectively. Others, depending on the level of consciousness and education, will pull a vote and some people will not vote at all. They'll just jam the machine and they don't even understand the machine. But, they at least get to the polls. But for a large number of us, one of the major problems with us Hispanics is the lack of people who are registered to vote on election day. The number is very small and that's been a major problem for us. If you ask me why do I think that's true, it has been so, till now, this, uh, you're talking about, let's say, 1982, or 1980, which is ten years after Gibson was elected. You can see nobody got in. Seven years later, we didn't get anybody in. I really just think that we have gone through some real serious problems in terms of the issue. I remember many years ago in the 1970s, Dr. Hidalgo had done a study. In the study, she had made some remarks and recommendations about leadership in the Hispanic community. And I still think that some of her points were very well taken then, and very real then, and still hold true. And

one of the problems has been that we have had a lot of individuals who view political leadership as a way for them to either economically increase their own personal wealth, their image. I mean, sometimes it's not even money. It's just to be considered a leader. It's like an ego trip. How do you gratify your ego. Others have really been what I consider a duty. So, I've always been very supportive of that report she had made and I always look back at it and things haven't changed any. And to a degree, there has been some change, you have some younger people who are now mature adults, who have a good education, who are articulate, who understand what public policy is about. Because it's not enough to be a councilman, or a freeholder, or an assemblyman, or something like that. You gotta understand why you are there and this whole system is based on legislation. Laws that are made which then govern the city and many of the laws that are in the book really do not support or enhance the development of Puerto Ricans, or people in general still. And we have not really had Hispanic leaders in Newark who have been able to put together uh, policies and legislate..legislative agendas that can begin to address some of our major problems as Puerto Ricans and Hispanics. For example, in 1972, or 1971, when La Casa was first started, we gathered every Monday night and we'd have dinner. We did this with ten families that myself and Alfonso Romal, who's a minister for the United Church of Christ , and who had been brought to Newark to assist in developing a Puerto Rican ministry within the Protestant churches, and at that time, in 1971, we all put together what we perceived...all of what we perceived as the major problem of the Puerto Rican community. If I asked twenty other families, or ten families, they would probably come up with the same list.

Vivian: And what is that?

Ramon: Housing; that's a major, very critical problem. When I talk about housing, I'm talking about housing in many respects--affordable housing people can afford. Decent housing, where people have a place that the rain doesn't come in when it rains, or that when you flush your toilet, it doesn't flush into your living room. Or that it's not full of pests, like roaches and rats. That is what I'm talking about. That when winter comes, you have heat and that your windows are sealed, so that winter hawk does not come in and freeze your babies, and give you colds and keep you constantly in the hospital. That's what I talk about--decent housing. Affordable housing, I'm talking about, that people don't pay more than 20, 25% of their monthly income on the rent. And usually the case is totally different. The cost of these hovels or shacks are totally unacceptable. I consider dwelling for people costs much more, usually a

persons whole monthly paycheck. So people have to live the rest of the month hand in mouth, or things are so marginal, in terms of the income and the rent, that they tend to fall behind in the rent, and so forth if they have any crisis. They other issue about housing is availability. Newark has always had a low-vacancy rate. That means that at any given time the apartments available, that are affordable to poor people--which Puerto Ricans make up a large part of--can afford, or want. Some people do not want to live in some of these housing. So, those are the areas of housing. Then you have the whole aspect of education. You have a huge number of kids who come to this country with very low levels of skills and language, the english language, and we lose them in the school system. Particularly those kids who are in the junior high and high school level. It is really sad that we're losing a generation of our young people. We're missing the opportunity to educate them. And the reason is that they're dropping out, like 50-60% of the youngsters who are a part of the school system will drop out of school before graduation in high school. And most of them leave with very little skills, so their opportunities, in terms of having access to good jobs, incomes, is limited. And it's very...in fact, it's against all odds, perhaps. The other problem is always health. When I was working, as I said, with the Young Lords, we found that there was an incredible number of young people, babies with lead poison. And lead poisoning comes from kids having mal-nutrition and developing what they call "pica", where they would take pieces of plaster and paint and other things, and eat it. You know how kids put everything in their mouths. Well, they acquire a taste for this and "pica". When you eat paint that has lead in it or any other substance that has lead in it, it will eventually lead to brain damage. So we found a lot of youngsters who had really begun to have the initial stages of brain damage and that really alerted me because then, the next thing was what other problems did we have. We found out things that should've been wiped out in the U.S., in a city like Newark, which is supposed to have such fine facilities. We have a lot of hospitals. We have the Medical School of NJ right here. The UMDNJ, University of Medicine and Dentistry is right here. This is the place where we train doctors. No we were getting kids that were dying from lead poisoning, or having fits, uh, seizures. We then found out that a form of tuberculosis that had supposedly been wiped out was very prevalent in our community. All we had to do was go out and with a little simple thing called a time test, just test our kids. But, the institutions that were here, including the Board of Health, were not going out aggressively developing programs to prevent these illnesses that could've been totally wiped out. So we're looking at that when the community says we have problems with the hospital, problems with housing,

problems with education. We have problems with getting jobs--access to jobs, I mean. We have a community that is largely subsidized and who are seeing more and more of what I call the disfunctional family, that you don't have a father and mother. What you have is a mother who has all the children. A single head of household that's a female, whose usually very young and is receiving a subsidy from welfare and foodstamps. So that is becoming more and more a major problem and we're seeing now what we call second and third generation youngsters who, when they become adults, who become pregnant out of wedlock, are repeating exactly what occurred with their parents, or mother. Notice, that's a very bleak picture and the thing is, what does leadership in our community do about that? You can't be some dingbat that decides because he puts on a tie and suit that he's going to lead our community out of this. This requires organizing, research, it requires developing coalitions, it requires the community to have respect for you. To be able to say, fulano is for us, and usually what we get is that fulano, or fulana, is for fulana, so there's a suspicion there to follow, there's an alienation from our community in terms of political leadership and you need strong political leadership to tackle the mass of problems. I'm talking about, in terms of health, education, housing and appointment, which are always the major four categories our people are concerned about.

Vivian: So do you feel that our problem lies within our own people? Or does it lie just in the city of Newark?

Ramon: Let me tell you...I can't, I can't say that it is totally our problem. Which....what I ascribe to politically is, that no matter what the cause is, we've got to be pragmatic about getting out of it. I mean, I can't say, okay, this was caused because of the system--we can just blame it on the system syndrome. It may be true that racism, the fact that Puerto Ricans are pushed out from Puerto Rico, because there are no jobs or opportunities they come here. Uh, the fact of the matter is that you're here and we have all these problems. Are we going to sit by and wait till someone comes and magically and benevolently rinses us of our problems? My answer to that is, no. We must take the bull by the horn and we must be our own Messiahs. We must get ourselves out of this problem, and the only way to do it is to harness our own energy, and by organizing ourselves into strong, political, social and economic groups. Just get out, simple as that, and that's probably the philosophy that I have been espousing for now over twenty years from the whole, my own development and to the consciousness from the Young Lords, to when I worked with the students in the streets in an organization called "Oye", till La Casa's founding. And La Casa has always pushed it in that



direction. The people that work with me as board members, and the staff believe in that. We must do it for ourselves, you cannot depend on anybody. It doesn't mean that we don't accept help from people. La Casa could not do what we do if we did not have hundreds and hundreds of people, from churches, from the private sectors like the foundations and corporations, city government, the county, the state. If these people didn't, did not help us, we wouldn't be where we are. But I don't think those people would help us if they gave us resources and we did nothing with it. Okay. Or, if we went in there with some Mickey Mouse plan and they knew it wasn't going to go anywhere. When we talk about solving a problem, we spell it out clearly. The problem right now is housing. Ten years before, in 1977, La Casa was not ready to build housing, so we didn't take that on. But we were prepared to be able to have a day-care center--to deal with those things we knew we could handle. In 1987, we're much more resourceful, much more developed and we know now that we've prepared ourselves. All our staff knows what we're about, and they've clearly taken on a challenge to do new things. Uhm, housing, which is a very difficult thing to develop, getting people jobs, we couldn't do that in 1977. But it all depends that what your resources are and what the timing is in terms of selecting an agenda. But, the other thing is that you have to deal with leadership through example, by doing. Uhm, you cannot promise people anymore because they don't believe, so the thing is, if "un gato viene a una reunion que yo llamo para ser un proyecto, con ese gato yo empiezo." Oh, I don't say we've got to cancel this meeting and we've gotta come back two weeks from now. No, I've got one person now and let's have another meeting and you bring me two and we're gonna move from there, and that's been our philosophy. You start with what you get initially and then you build on that and, everything we've done has been that way. We started with ten families; we've grown tremendously so.

Vivian: Okay. So, when you were with the Young Lords, you joined the coalition--the coalition with the blacks, and what happened to that?

Ramon: Well, what happened was that Kenneth Gibson was elected. Ramon Anese, who was the guy who ran for city council for the Puerto Rican community lost, but was appointed to be the Deputy Mayor. And in the beginning, the first couple of years of the Gibson Administration, there was a sense of Hispanics being a part of his administration, that things were moving, etc. But then it began to take a different course where Hispanics were just shut out, and you gotta remember that Ken Gibson was in office for sixteen years. So almost for, I would say, out of the sixteen, maybe ten or twelve years of that, the Hispanic Community, the Puerto

Rican community was really shut out. And Ramon Anese, and every other Deputy Mayor and staffperson that was part of the administration, was always an appointed position and they had very little authority or power--with the exception of cutting ribbons, and ceremonial tasks. And, what occurred was that even the black community began to be very dissatisfied with the Gibson Administration. It's just that it took them sixteen years to be able to change that. And again, I go back to the point that we were discussing earlier. I mean, you can't put your hopes on the fact that someone gets elected to office...all that he can do is help you open some doors, create some legislation, etc. But it is not going to solve all your problems. The only thing that can solve your problem is that well organized, well educated community that can mobilize itself in self-defense, or can be creative in saying, I'm going to develop a housing program, or I'm going to form an economic development project that will hire sixty people, a hundred people, a thousand people. It's people getting together and doing it. All that is done is usually done by a few people who care and take their time and have the commitment to be collective and cooperative. You have so many people in our community whose sole interest is themselves or their families and have very little time to get involved in any other thing, and the problem is that, sooner or later, their life is very affected. Also, whether its with crimes or drugs or blight, when the whole neighborhood falls apart and the value of the house drops, so no person or family is really an island when it comes to themselves. We are so inter-logged and so interdependent that we can't just turn away from each other. And that goes also to our relationships with blacks and whites. We can't, as Hispanics, work in a vacuum, isolated somewhere and say, we're just going to take care of our own, we're too interdependent. They need us and we need them and as long as the relationship is a positive one, and what I mean by positive is that both parties are receiving some measureable satisfaction out of the relationship, if not, then you divorce.

Vivian: Okay. Uh, Kenneth Gibson, on an interview, said...they asked him about the relationship between him and the Hispanics, and then his comment was that you can expect what you invest. That was his comment, how do you feel about that?

Ramon: Well, the statement is probably very real and repeat, in order for you to get something out of something you have to invest. I don't know how he was applying that. Was he applying that, insinuating that the Hispanic community was making no investment?

Vivian: Right, exactly.

Ramon: Well, I don't know. I would have to ask him more about the statement. But I know that the Hispanic community contributed very much to his election, has always contributed to the stability of the city. We are consumers who purchase a tremendous amount of food, clothing, accessories, radios, televisions, you know, so we keep the economy afloat. We are for the most part law-abiding citizens, so we contribute like anybody else. We pay taxes, and we're one of the few groups...for instance, during that period when everybody was running away from Newark, Hispanics were then buying property in Newark. So I cannot agree with that, the statement that we have not invested. Now what has always been a problem has been that we have had people selected as our leaders and representatives by individuals like Ken Gibson...I mean, we had Mike Rodriguez, who was selected as a Hispanic leader. As far as I am concerned, the people that he selected, Mike, and then there's another guy named...I forget, Deputy Mayor, a couple of Deputy Mayors who were really not representing our community. They were his employees, and our community had very little trust for them. When bonafide representatives of the community, that the community has selected to negotiate for us and so forth...Ken Gibson tended to shut them out because he knew that what they were saying was very real, and second, that they were not grinning and smiling and shuffling, but they were making real contributions and demands. They were saying this is part of what our rights are here in Newark and we're not getting it...whether it was housing, etc. First of all, he built, Ken Gibson, built thousands of units of new housing throughout the city of Newark. Almost a non-existent percent went to the Spanish families. And he can't tell me that blacks had more of an investment in Newark that we did. By all law, whether its federal law, whether its municipal law, county law, state law, or just moral law of justice, Hispanics deserved to have a proportionate amount of those units for their families. We're residents, we're citizens. We pay taxes and we suffer, we had a need to built it ourselves if necessary, but we gotta get it, cannot continue to live in hovels.

Vivian: So would you say that the reason a lot of Hispanics do not come out to vote is because of what happened with the Gibson Administration?

Ramon: We have never had leadership in a forefront, as candidates that our community has trusted; that our community feels that they are leadership in the most positive sense. What I am saying is intelligent, articulate, studious people who are committed and would sacrifice for them. No, most of the candidates we've had have been people that have been planted on us by outsiders simply to be controlled by them and our community knows that and is not going to support them. Simple as that.

Vivian: So, at the time when you came from New York to here, did you find that Hispanics were involved, or were they sort of like shuttled to the side? You know, quiet.

Ramon: Repeat the question.

Vivian: What I'm saying is that, when you came to Newark, did you find the Hispanic population that was living here in Newark to be introverted? More to themselves?

Ramon: Isolated. When I first came to Newark, one of the things that struck me as very positive was that Newark was a pretty large city. We had like 400,000 people. Second, there was the ability to have direct access to power. That meant you could meet the mayor, the council people. They could get to know you. And third, that there was little established organization, organizational efforts in the Puerto Rican or Hispanic community. At that time, Aspira of New Jersey was just being developed and was just getting off the ground, and FOCUS, the Field Orientation Center for Underprivileged Spanish was also a little storefront with one or two people. There was nothing else existing and the PUerto Rican community and Hispanic community depended on churches, on the different kind of churches for their spiritual, as well as leadership--general leadership--and a lot of priests had large groups of societies, the Santo Nombre, or something, the different religious Catholic societies, and there was nothing else. You had an appointed Deputy Mayor, it was Armenio Nieves who worked for Adonizzio and you had the people in very minor positions who were then the C.E.T.A. program and other areas, that was it. So, I looked at that as a problem, but I also looked at it as an opportunity because I knew that there was room for us to take young people and begin to organize, to begin to develop a sense of commitment to change some of the existent problems initially in the community, and begin a movement and we knew that it was possible in Newark. And if there had already been movements and things developed, then we would've had more problems. We would've even been competing with existing groups or we would've just joined them.

Vivian: How old were you at that time?

Ramon: I was in my 20s...22.

Vivian: Getting back to education, a lot of people drop out of school. Do you feel it is because of the language barrier?



Ramon: I feel it's a combination of things. In Newark, one of the things that is very evident is that after a certain grade, there is almost very little teaching going on in the schools. What I mean is that if you're a student and really interested in learning and you have a certain level of maturity and you're motivated, I think you have a hard time in school because most of what occurs is not educational. It's nocturnal, it's disruptive. So that's one problem. The other thing that I see occur, as soon as a youngster reaches the seventh grade, parental involvement with the child and schooling tends to drop off. So you have, I'm talking in generality, certainly there are exceptions to the rule, but for a major part, our community tends to be very involved with our children all the way, from day-care, all the way to the sixth grade. And you see all the parents take them to school, participate in school activities, auditoriums, P.T.A. Once they get to the seventh grade and they get to be either in junior high or high school, that tends to really drop off and that's one of the problems. The other thing is skills. Since the kids are not getting a lot of assistance at home.... Uh, I have twin boys that are fifteen. They spend two or three hours a day doing homework. I dare say that a youngster in high school in Newark does not spend much doing homework. So again, you can't learn everything in the classroom and if the classroom is constantly in chaos, very little learning is done and then if you do no homework at home, and if you get no help from your parents as tutors, because that is the traditional tutor. I mean, we can't afford to hire professionals to do it. And there are programs that would assist youngsters, but they must be motivated. They must then, after school, go to those tutorial programs. So, we don't do that. And, again, we can blame it on the system, but I think that we need to take some responsibility ourselves as parents and as a community and say the same thing I said before. No matter what, we gotta get our kids educated because that's our future and whatever we have to do, we have to go through, whether it's... I mean, you see some communities get so adamant about the poor, school system, that they set up their own schools. So, even if we have to do that, whatever we have to do I say its important enough to do to save our children's future. So education is such an important facet of what's going to happen to us twenty years from now.

Vivian: Would you say that the reason that the parents aren't as involved with their children after they reach a certain grade is because of the lack of education they have?

Ramon: Well, I would say that if I didn't see them very involved with the children from the first grade to the sixth grade, but, they're very involved with the kids at that period. I do not know, I don't have the answer to that. I don't know.

I know that my parents both worked and well, a lot of times I had to play catch by myself. I suspect that in those given days most parents, both of them work, and most of the kids tend to be what they call "latch key" kids, and they are not getting a lot of support from parents or brothers and sisters. And also there's no structure to sit down and say, two hours of studying. The schools are not enough so the whole break down. I think the problems begin after the sixth grade. My parents aren't necessarily the most education. And a lot of Jewish immigrants or other immigrants were not the most educated. So they knew that the most tradeable commodity for the future of any people, race, or nation, is its educated population. And we're sentencing our children to slavery and life as a sub-culture and underpriced if we're not educated. I think that's one of the most pressing problems of a community. It's also a national problem. You gotta understand that the educational system...

Vivian: What type of experiences did you first come across when you first came to Newark?

Ramon: Well, that Hispanics were totally isolated, had no power at all, whatsoever. That was very striking that 60,000 people were just disenfranchised and very little was done to change that. To put them in a position of having at least a voice over, regarding their concerns.

Vivian: As an individual, how did you feel that you could help that?

Ramon: Well, as an individual I felt that I could do very little myself. But I felt that if I could work with other people that felt like I did, that were frustrated with the conditions of our community, that we could harness that anger and frustration and begin to sit down, and really analyze the problem; then develop sound, pragmatic strategies to change that. And I think that you see my statements..that I try not to attribute our problem all the time just to outside forces because that to me is shirking the responsibility that we have to say, I am the master of my own destiny. I really believe all of that. That we can, as a community organize ourselves and be very strong and that what prevents us is our sense of collective and cooperative work. But we've kept that for 15 years. We've become successful, but it's a battle. I mean, it's tiring to continually try to organize.

Vivian: Educations seems to be a very, a very big issue with us. How do you feel about the bilingual program?

Ramon: I think the bilingual program in concept is very sound; in practice it has been bastardized. It no longer has the

children, and again I'm speaking in general, it no longer has the children as its major focus. But it actually became a jobs program for unemployed Hispanic teachers, which is not bad, but it should, the focus should be on the kids. so that's how I feel about and so, again, it's the concept, it's sound. What they've done is they've bastardized it. For instance, in Newark you have hundreds of teachers who are Hispanics, a lot of which the first thing they did was that they moved out of Newark. They went out and bought houses in the suburbs. They are not involved in the day to day lives of the kids they teach, nor the community they work with. So to me, they are not much better than a white teacher who does the same, who lives outside, who's mostly involved and concerned with preserving their jobs. Whether they're black or white or Hispanics. I don't see a major commitment from all the Hispanic teachers to really every stay in Newark because the first thing they do is live outside, second, they don't advocate for the kids. they only time teachers come out of the gummy holes, or their classrooms, is when their jobs are threatened. Right away my phone will ring because they want me to lead a group of parents, a demonstration to the Board of Education to preserve so and so's job. I refuse to do that. I did it a couple of times and I quickly learned that I was being used.

Vivian: So it becomes a political thing?

Ramon: Yeah, it's jobs. I mean everybody looks after their own jobs. Everybody was saying about people who're interested in their financial status. They're really not looking around the community. Yet, each one will talk a good a man. Everybody in Newark, the blacks, the whites, the Hispanics got an elected Board of Education, whether the teachers or elected board are always talking about the children, but it's not about the children, it's about jobs, and good pay-jobs that it is.

Vivian: So where in Newark do you come to live?

Ramon: Excuse me?

Vivian; Where in Newark did you come to live?

Ramon: I've always lived, I lived in Spruce Street. I've lived all over Newark. On Orange Street, Spruce Street. I lived in Hasberry Place down in the South Ward. For a couple of years I lived out in Hillside which is a town next. I was very unhappy not living in Newark. In fact that led to my divorce from my first wife. I just hated the suburbs. That's not even a suburb. Whatever it is, it's a township.

Vivian: So, when you came to live in Newark, you came by yourself?

Ramon: The first, yeah. I met my wife here while I was working at Essex County College doing some teaching as a part-time and my wife was a student and that's when I first met her.

Vivian: So how many children do you have with your wife?

Ramon: I have twin boys and they're 15, and now I have a new marriage and I have a two -year old and we live here in Newark.

Vivian: And all of your three children are growing up here in Newark?

Ramon: My twin boys grew up here in Newark for a long time. Then, they moved to Hillside and still live in Hillside and go to Catholic School in Roselle.

Vivian: So, what's the experience of your children growing up in Newark now than when you first came?

Ramon: The question again? What....

Vivian: Like, okay...your children....

Ramon: What's the experience between their experience and mine?

Vivian: Yeah, right.

Ramon: Well, I think first of all, that my children are fortunate because they have parents that...my wife is a former teacher, she's an attorney. My ex-wife, uh, and what I was talking about before, she understands very clearly and I do, that the next important commodity, thing that we have, to be able to do for ourselves in the future is an education, and the preparation of our youngsters to be leaders, to be poets, the be artists, to be very, very, you know, whatever they can be, the maximum. She's very involved with their education, every aspect of it and I spend a lot of money getting them through school. And when they're going to go through college I'm sure we're going to go just crazy making sure they go to the right school. And we know which is the right school. It's not like my parents who didn't know and we're not relinquishing their education to teachers. We are involved. I receive, every time they receive their report card, I receive a report and I look at it. Anything goes wrong, I want to know about it. so, we're involved in that sense. So I would talk to my youngsters when they're not meeting the levels of expectations that I have for them. But they're at the top of their class, so I am very fortunate.



Vivian: Okay. In Newark there was a riot one time with the Puerto Ricans.

Ramon: 1960...in the park...'84,...'74!

Vivian: '74.

Ramon: 1974, Branch Brook Park.

Vivian: Right. Can you tell me about that?

Ramon: Well, I was not at the park when that happened. What occurred was that they were having a feast. This was a Hispanic festival that was sponsored by FOCUS and it was in Essex County's Branch Brook Park, which is right here, about two blocks away from here. And they had all the traditional, cultural things that we have in these festivals--pavos sobao, they took the grease out, people carve out and get money, and those little "quioscos" where they sell food. Some people had begun to have illicit dice and card games and beer was flowing around very steadily. It was a summer day, very nice, very lovely day, and I remember I was at one of the local state parks, one of the beaches, I think it was Cheesquake, and I had an FM station which I'd listen to, the Jazz station, and over the radio there was an announcement that there was a riot, a disturbance occurring in Branch Brook Park and that the Puerto Rican community was involved. And anything that comes out in FM Radio in the english speaking station, right, indicated that it was serious. So, I picked up my wife and I headed up here and when I got here the people were converging at City Hall. Thousands of people had marched from City Hall and they had, many of them, had participated in stoning the police. Apparently one one of the horses had trampled a child or something and the rumor spread through the park that the child was dead, and you know how rumors move fast, right. So, before you know, people were angry. You know, sneaky young guys were throwing beer bottles and rocks at the police and they were so overcome that they feared--they had horses and cars and stuff--that they had to withdraw. So an emergency was called and all these policemen from Newark Police Dept, County, the County Park Police, all were on holiday where ever people go, you know, beaches, ponds, etc. And they all came in their shorts with their guns hanging. everybody just came down and there was a battle, people would get shot, beaten, arrested. Trampled. this spread through the area, there was a huge meeting in front of City Hall. That's when I got there and I remember getting there and the people seeing me and started to chant my name and saying that they wanted me to speak. So they climbed me up on a car and I began to talk to them and ask questions and

discuss things. It was clear that there was a lot of anger over what had happened. There were a lot of people who apparently had had too much to drink, also I noticed that these were some groups from the Puerto Rican Socialist Party there and they were trying to excite. Uh, and you could see a whole line of horses and police surrounding everyone. We had selected a group of people right there to meet with the Mayor and the Mayor had refused to meet with us. Finally, they met with us and there were some demands that the people had formulated. When they asked that, the Mayor basically ignored everything and one of the members of the contingent that was meeting with the Mayor went back down and told the people that the Mayor was not really moving on any of the requests or the demands and the people really got angry and started stoning the Mayor's windows. And as I am sitting there in the Mayor's office, you could see the rocks hitting the windows. So it was very tense. There was a dispersal of people eventually with a request that the people meet at another place on Broadway that same evening, but some people were uncontrollable and they continued to rampage through different neighborhoods and what happened was that the police actually killed a couple of people. One of them very suspiciously was shot with a shotgun and dumped on a railroad track. Witnesses say that the police, that the last they had seen the person alive was when the police put him in the patrol car and drove away with the youngster. Then he was found the next day shot on the railroad tracks and after the investigation was done, it was found that the police had done the shooting. It was no doubt that the shotgun pellets were police issued, that the gun fired had been a police shotgun. Yet, to this day they have never found who the policemen--because there was more than one--were. And you know, that that really highlights and points to the lack of power that our community has in Newark, or had at that time. I'm sure that the conditions are similar today.

Vivian: The chairman of the Hispanic Emergency Council at that time was Fernando Zambrana.

Ramon: Let me tell you about that. See, there was a group that the community had selected which I was a part of. There were blacks involved, other Hispanics. What the Mayor did was, he refused to deal with us and he set up this group called HEC. He appointed his backers. These were the people that he controlled, his Puerto Ricans.

Vivian: Uh, well this person...

Ramon: Who absolutely, the people had nothing to do with.

Vivian: What, with the Emergency council?

Ramon: So, again.

Vivian: So they had no power?

Ramon: No, and they did absolutely nothing.

Vivian: Well, this person said that it was unfortunate that an incident of that sort, you know, had to take place in order to have the community take a look at the Puerto Ricans. Do you feel that maybe incidents will make them look at us?

Ramon: I don't like these kinds of incidents, and let me tell you why. First of all, I can't feel good or positive about any loss of life, particularly the way it was done. It wasn't in any direct manner, it was murder. It was police murdering in cold blood. Second, I don't really see anything that came out of that, I mean, I don't, I saw absolutely nothing except a couple of dingbat-so-called appointed leaders by the Mayor got into City Hall and brown-nose him. You know, it disgusted me, you know they were feeling great. The Mayor appointed me to be...unimportant...what I was talking about was this ego trip. A lot of people wanted to do nothing with these guys, men and women. Second, they did absolutely nothing, They were absolutely zeros and I refused them anyway. Today, most of them still running around here are dingbats, cause there's always been dingbats here. People like that don't get better they get worse, or stagnate.

Vivian: So are these people that....

Ramon: --And, and you might think I'm not charitable, but these people have been obstacles for our development as a community. They have been legal obstacles. I always say that we start moving forward, sure enough one of these dingbats is going to come out and get in the way. It never fails. It never fails that the Mike Rodriguez' and Zambranas, they come out of the woodwork because they like to negotiate on our behalf.

Vivian: So, would you say that they are affected by the political, the American government?

Ramon: I don't think they are affected by anything. I think, I think they are different strokes. Zambrana, for instance, I don't think his problem was the same as Mike Rodriguez or some of these other people. Zambrana is well-intentioned, he just doesn't understand what power is about or how to organize and he feels very, his ego gets inflated when the Mayor says, Fernando, you're my friend. I mean, his head gets, oh, my God. Uh, and I prefer if he came to him and said, you're not in, or you're not my friend. But he was standing up for our people, I mean, it's a stroke, stroke me master.

Vivian: How would you compare the 1974 riot with that of the 1967 black riot?

Ramon: It was totally different. Again, riots are very negative in essence. They are destructive and peoples always ask the question: are riots due to poverty or unemployment? Or lack of schools and opportunities? And my response is, if that were the case, we would riot everyday, twice a day, because we're poor every day. Racism exists against us. Everyday we live in the worse ghettos. And we don't riot everyday. That's not what creates riots. Riots are things that occur like, uh, like you know, an atomic, uh, fusion. You know, when you have atoms colliding. Crazy things that occur--because of what? The police, well, people are tired of policemen smacking them in the face, beating them on the heads, putting handcuffs on them and away; locking them up and not giving them access to bail and not giving them access to a telephone--when those kinds of conditions exist in a city, and that was occurring. I mean, we had a force that was 90% white--mostly white ethnics who lived out of the city who considered blacks and hispanics animals. Now, if you consider somebody an animal you would have no hesitation of wiping that animal out like the roach or lizard or something. So, that's what was the problem. I mean, we had people who had become very tired of doing that and one guy said, I'm not going to take that anymore, and fought back and everybody joined him and said, vamos a meterle un cantazo a esos, you know, racistas, those dogs. And that's what happened. It was spontaneous, there was no leadership. Yeah, it was people going crazy, angry and they had very little to lose. But, it wasn't because of poverty, it wasn't because of poverty, it wasn't because of lack of education, because otherwise we would do it everyday, and we would do it organized, like revolutionary movements in other countries that get organized, and they know what they are doing. They say, we want to kill ten cops and not get killed in return. Right [laughing]. These guys were going to suicides. Could you imagine all these people fighting the police? They've got guns, sticks, helmets, horses. And here are these people, sin nada, con una botellita, getting the hell knocked out of them. Not only that, our women were always in the way, and our children. I was scared that our kids were going to get killed. So, I'm not inner move man riots, as I prefer organization, putting them against the wall and finding other ways to embarrass them and whatever we have to do, but not put ourselves as victims. Because they love to beat the hell out of us. Those guys went home and had sexual dreams.



- Vivian: [laughing] How do you feel--you were saying you would prefer to put them up against a wall and all that. How do you feel we're going to get what we're going to get from that? Or do you feel the Puerto Rican community can do that?
- Ramon: Yeah, we can. All we need to do is become very cooperative and organized. We always had the power to throw the wrench into something. Let's say right now the school system is not working and there's a school in front of La Casa called Franklin. There's different strategies you could use to affect that. You could organize the parents to work within the school system. You could work with the teachers, etc. to create. Or you can have sit-ins, you know, and stop the thing from functioning. You can start political pressure to get rid of the principal. So you make an example for the, hey there's different strategies and that's what you need to concentrate on and put your hopes in. And also you got to know what you want to do. you can't organize for the sake of organizing. You can't demonstrate for the sake of demonstrating or pretesting or whatever strategy you are using to pressure because you are dissatisfied with what's going on and you have an alternative plan that they refuse to put into place and you're going to force them to. They may not accept yours 100%, but maybe negotiate it so you get 80%, 60%. We're willing to negotiate.
- Vivian: Okay. When La Casa was established in 1971 you adopted the motto, "El camino se hace caminando".
- Ramon: Right, that comes from a poem from Machado, but it's really, I bastardized it. It's really, "el caminante, el camino se hace al andar."
- Vivian: So, with your experiences as the director of La Casa, how has the proven itself an and how do you apply it [the motto] to the Puerto Ricans, the Puerto Rican community all over?
- Ramon: Yeah, what I was saying before. We need to create things by example. La Casa is a small example of what can be done throughout the city. There could be many La Casas. For instance, La Casa is, or never intended or wanted to be an organization taking care of all the neighborhoods where Hispanics live in the city. No, we would like to see St. Columba, El Club del Barrio, FOCUS, all organizations, all doing basically the same thing originally, which is organizing people, bringing people together to talk about their problems. But not only to talk about problems all day, but to develop some strategies and plans to change some of these problems, to take some responsibility ourselves and when the city doesn't respond in terms of their responsibilities, then we take on the city, the state. We

take whoever we need to take on, the Board of Education, or the police department. But first we have to invest. Maybe that's what Ken Gibson was saying. We can't just sit back and say, give me the jobs. We're not going to be given the jobs, and you gotta be out there working, organizing. You gotta be involved. You gotta be informed. You gotta get in, in the fray.

Vivian: As a political man, how do you feel about statehood, and about Puerto Rico?

Ramon: Statehood, uh, I never, as long as I have lived and been conscious, as a young person, understood why Puerto Rico is not a free nation. I could never accept that. Never, no one has ever given me the intelligent, logical answer to convince me that we should be anything but a free nation. Doesn't mean that we are hostile to the U.S. Looking at the rest of the world, the U.S. is one of the best countries in the world to live in and we have a lot of problems in this country. But, certainly we are still way ahead above most countries, or other countries in general. Puerto Ricans are discriminated against, but yet we have the ability to move within the system.

Vivian: So, you feel we should be independent?

Ramon: Oh! I've always felt that--a nation, a free nation. And it doesn't mean I'm saying we shouldn't be aligned to the U.S. But why should Israel be a free nation, and you know. Uh, uh, the trend on the whole world is that most people are killing themselves over a nation, over a real estate. Real estate is the basis of all things. I mean for instance, space. You can tell rich people by the space they control. They further you get out to the suburbs and the rich neighborhoods, what do they have? ...Big houses, right? WE are all crowded into these hovels and these ghettos and we have an island. We have one of the most beautiful islands or pieces of real estate that I've seen. And I've travelled quite a bit in different parts of the world and yet here we are, a whole group of our community, bright, some very bright people, articulate people, educated, want to give this away. I have no, I can't understand it. It's illogical to me, it doesn't make any sense to me. Because, first of all, you have the Palestinians' jobs, the Israelites, Zainos, both fighting, killing themselves for hundreds of years in war, for what? A piece of land, so they can put their flag and say, esto es mio. The same thing in Africa. I mean, African countries have fought to oust colonial government--European colonial government. People in South Africa are really fighting for what they want. They want their land, they want control for their land and, basically, I feel that we have it and we could get it

if our people thought about it logically, and all these boogymen that they have--communism and Castro--is going to swim over and control our thoughts and minds. All of that is nonsense. I feel people are too educated to believe that, but apparently a lot of them do. That we will starve--that's crazy. I mean, we won't starve. We have one of the highest literacy rates in that whole region. Our sense of democracy is very high, 80% of our people go to the polls and vote, so that's well entrenched. You know, I can't see all these arguments, that you know, we're going to starve. That's nonsense.

Vivian: So you feel that we've come a long way in terms of back then and now? Puerto Rico has progressed--that's what you're saying?

Ramon: Of course P.R. has progressed. And a lot of it has to do with relationships with the U.S. But also because of our own ability to work. I mean, a lot of our people work very hard.

Vivian: As...

Ramon: And believe in education.

Vivian: As a young man, what did you dream of doing? What did you want to do? What was your goal?

Ramon: Well, my first dream as a young man was to be a pilot, and in fact, I went to a school called Aviation High School in Long Island. but I certainly realized right away that I didn't like airplane mechanics and all of that. So, it was just a young boy's fantasy. I'm doing what I enjoy doing most and the good thing about it is that I get paid for it. It is very rewarding. You know, I tend to be a very hard person; I can be hard on other people, even my own family and stuff, but there's a reason--I mean to my madness. But it's a question of building, and I enjoy and get very gratified by watching, so I enjoy our community's creativity or ability of survival of circumstances and I want to be a part of creating models that other people can replicate. And one of the things I've been major in is, I've been helping other organizations to develop like La Casa has, or in some cases we have brought community organizations to the state and talked about economic development; developing businesses or getting involved in housing; making money; so that we can have some economic clout and be able to employ our people. Well, these are some of the things I've been doing.

- Vivian: Yeah. We have this stereotype attached to us that we're lazy. A lot of people do not want to give us jobs because they feel that we're not going to last there too long; that we're more bound towards the welfare roll. How do you feel about that?
- Ramon: Well...those are stereotypes as you said, uhm, and they really don't deserve a lot of merit or attention. We are people who certainly have a different culture than Americans, in terms of our work effort. But it's not negative, it's a positive thing. We, we look at work and it must have dignity. I mean, for instance, I have seen people with tremendous responsibility--children, rent, mortgages--leave a job because some "gringo" or some other person has insulted them, and I see that occur. I mean, we are very concerned about our dignity; how people respect us as human beings. Sometimes that's misunderstood, so other people say, "ay mira, they don't care about their jobs". That's really not so. I mean we care about the job, but we don't want to be treated like animals. We want to be respected as human beings. Uh, there is a sector in our community who are victims of some of the things we've talked about this evening. A question of poor education...uh, women who become mothers very early in life and who begin to be part of that whole subsidized frame of mind where they live month to month. They receive foodstamps, welfare and, after a while, it becomes very difficult to break out of that. We need to develop strategies and when I say we, I mean organizations like La Casa and other groups to help our people pull out of that. Cause again, we can't relinquish our responsibility to the system. To, let's say, the state government, to say they're going to get our people out of welfare. We have to help them out and work with them. Doesn't mean that we're going to do it all, but should at least put ideas in there and wherever we can, create programs. Uh, nothing has worked better than self-help.
- Vivian: So that would be the advice you give to people who are presented with all obstacles from day to day?
- Ramon: [long pause] It all depends. Let me tell you, it's hard to give advice in a general sense. Because we make it sound very trite. Sometimes when you give that advice, people listen to you and say, "this guy thinks everything is so easy, he hasn't gone through it", that kind of stuff. But I agree with them, it seems like I know it all. No, I won't even attempt to do that. What I try to do is deal with every human being, or family or individual [pause] with their particular problem. And one of the things that has become much clearer to me as I've gotten older is that there is no simple solution to many things. But there are ways to teach people strategies to cope. That doesn't mean that

then you leave them alone; that you give them 10 points how to get out of welfare for instance; or ten points on how to get away from being a drug addict. It doesn't work; those menus are nonsense. It's like the book that people read about losing weight. No, what it is I'm telling you it could be done, because I'm doing it for a lot of those, etc. this is the example. Second, I'm going to be with you or I'm going to have people with you or work with you to make sure that you cope. I'm going to help you. You put in, you invest, you get involved, you do for yourself and I will help you. But the motivation can't come from me. It has to come from the individual. Otherwise, it's paternal. You know, I see these people constantly creating dependency, and whether they're social workers, religious people, government people, they feel good. "Mira, yo le ayude a fulanito, le di una comprita, un pavo". You know that's great, I mean, but I prefer if I could do something for fulano, so he doesn't have to come and ask. Again, because that affects fulano's dignity and I would like to build fulano's motivation, some comfort, sense of self. That they say, "contra, I don't need to ask anybody for anything. I can earn my way. I can, I have things that are of value that I can trade off for income or for food or something else. You know, having a sense that you have value is very important. But, that's very hard. I mean, a lot of people have lost that and it's not only Hispanics, it's across the world.

Vivian: So you're saying that, in terms of the Puerto Rican community, we are very proud people?

Ramon: Very proud.

Vivian: So that comes...

Ramon: But you also can lose that because when you have a very high standard of self-worth and dignity...when you have to do things that in your eyes, your personal eyes, violates that, then you can go to the other extreme and say, "yo, yo soy malo porque hice eso, porque tuve que pedir", you know.

Vivian: So, getting back to the statehood, us being a commonwealth of the U.S.--how do you feel that if we remain a commonwealth, how would that affect us culturally? Or the future of our culture?

Ramon: Well, I've always felt...in the last 25 years that the trend for people to be more and more Americanized have been in the favor of those people who lean toward statehood and I think that the longer it takes us to decide the decision, the more it favors statehood which is sad, but true. Well, there's another part to that. You know, Puerto Ricans in a lot of times think that the reason they're in U.S. and not in

Puerto Rico right now is because they don't want to be a state. Because they want to be a commonwealth. That's not true. The reality of that is that since the 1940s the U.S. government, the Congress, the Senate, have not wanted P.R. to be part of the U.S. Let me tell you the reasons. One is language and culture. We would come in as a whole country that speaks and has an official language which is different than english. Now you know how sensitive people are about English, cause they're trying to pass a law now for English only, [laughing] in the U.S., which is their country. So imagine...three million Puerto Ricans coming in and, as a state whose official language is Spanish, that's number one. Whose official holidays in culture and religion are very different than this country. So that's one problem that U.S. is afraid of because, you know, this could be the beginnings of people feeling eventually discriminated against or whatever and you have like what happened in Canada or other countries, actual revolts, or "los Vascos" in Espana, etc. Or the other argument is that Puerto Rico right now is welcome into the nation, to the U.S. as part of one of the poor states. Now you got to remember that the U.S. gives us foodstamps and they don't give us anything else, but if we become a state, what else would they have to do?

Vivian: Give us welfare.

Ramon: Welfare and a lot of other government things that they don't give us. You know that and other arguments indicate that they don't want us because of these things. It's not good business for them and this is ultimately a capitalist country that looks at things from the business sense.

Vivian: So what is your stand on that English Only...law that they want to pass?

Ramon: Well, I think it's a bullshit law, I mean, this country has always been multi-lingual, bilingual, uh, and uh, it's a sneaky way, a back door way from these conservative people who have no other issue of really...I mean, this is what you call a non-creative, dumb issue that they're all getting into bandwagons. But what it's really intended to do is to take programs that are like bilingual programs and end those. All of these about bilingual ballots for elections, uh, they want to eliminate those. They want to eliminate interpreters in courts...it's a nonsense law. It's a nuisance law, but if they pass it, I mean the effects of it could be very detrimental to certain programs, other than the people who speak Spanish. I mean [laughing], they're not going to prevent anybody from communicating in their own language. They can only affect those things they have control over and in fact, that may have the opposite affect where everybody may start speaking Spanish just to create what I call protest.



- Vivian: So you came here at a very early age. So do you feel that you've adapted to the American culture and have lost a little of the Puerto Rican culture within your...or do you feel...
- Ramon: Well, to be honest, I have absorbed a lot of language that's English. I speak Spanish but I had to learn Spanish as I was growing up. I had...I went through a very serious period of identity crisis through teenage...you know, from adolescence to adulthood. I really didn't know what I was. You know, I was a Puerto Rican but I didn't have any sense of what that was. I didn't know what a Puerto Rican was. I mean it was a word. I knew about the island; I knew about the food, but it was a sense of feeling and what I did was I made a major effort through the whole period I was in the Young Lords. I think I went to the other extreme. You know what I mean? I became a super Puerto Rican, symbolically, emotionally. I mean, [laughing] I went through an African period where I was into being black. I went from one extreme right where people would ask me what I was, and I had the feeling I was black, [laughs] and people would look at me and ask me, You're Black? What do you mean you're black? I'd say, well this country only has two colors, you're either white or black, right? I'm not other, like that. I went through that and I wore Dashikis and all of that stuff. Prior to that I went through being white, I mean or a color, no color, uh. You know what I mean, I was like, Ray. I mean people are in my neighborhood like Spanish Ray like that .
- Vivian: Do you attribute that to the fact that you travelled and were stationed in so many places?
- Ramon: Yeah, well I lived in areas where there were very few Puerto Ricans and my friends were not Puerto Ricans. Certainly there were a couple of Hispanics. So I was, in fact, they would distinguish me from other kids by calling me Spanish Ray and uh, I, I related to them. They were all very white. I used to have very little sense of what it was to Be Puerto Rican. I knew I was Puerto rican and I nver denied that, but my father's and mother's accents would embarass me. You know, I considered them hickey, uh, you know, a lot of things which were really self-hate and it took me a a period of my self-awareness and introspections to really begin to kind of, uh, exorcise that from myself and begin to form an identity, a real identity that I felt comfortable with.
- Vivian: So you have overcome that then?

Ramon: I don't think we ever overcome it. I think you strive all the time to become very conscious because it's almost like internal devils that you have inside. Such that it influences and things that you have to be very conscious and aware all the time in order to move in a positive direction.

Vivian: Has that affected the way you raise you children?

Ramon: You know, I was married, again, I went through my black period, so my first wife, the mother of the twins is black. So my children are half black, half Puerto Rican. So it's kind of very difficult for them. They're Puerto Ricans...they're going to go through their own identity crisis.

Vivian: How long were you married to her?

Ramon: Twelve years.

Vivian: What's her name?

Ramon: Patricia.

Vivian: And your twins?

Ramon: One is Ramon Emeterio and the other is Francisco.

Vivian: So do you have any closing statements in terms to the community--whether to the young, the middle-aged, or the elder?

Ramon: You know, I do a lot of these things in terms of media and talking about...and all I'll say is that I will continue to do that..uh, articulate whatever our history has been, what I think our future should be like. But at the same time things gotta go beyond words. They have to be supported by deeds, action, and we cannot--we could--but we should not act alone. There is logic in the old land that says there's strength and unification in cooperative efforts, and I believe very strong that, that we can help each other and we should help each other. but the only way we're going to do that is if people, particularly young people are educated, committed, conscious young people that get involved, that begin to get in to the front line when they're called on a day-to-day basis to refuse or to repel aganation from organizations from LaCasa. We need to get many, many more people to get involved. I was doing an exercise for school, I'm part, I'm going through an internship over developmental training. One of the questions was, it's really about the agency. It's an analysis of a system and I picked the organization La Casa. To describe one of the things they asked is, who are the members of La Casa and you would say,

that's a simple question. But it is a very complex question. Then not only who are the members, but why do they feel they are members? What is their association? Are they strongly identified? Do they strongly identify with La Casa as members, or as a recipient of a service? You know, it's like a simple question, it's very complex. So in closing, I just want to say it's important for us to understand that very complex things can be broken into simple things so then we can tackle them, and as we discussed before, we can leave the things that we did not achieve today for another day, but certainly we need to tackle something everyday, struggle.

Vivian; I'd like to thank you for giving me the interview and serving as an example to the community, the Hispanic community and letting us know that we can, and do have hope to progress.

END OF INTERVIEW